

You are kindly invited to the public defense to obtain the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

of Ms. Lisa Van Hove

Which will take place on **March 3** at 4 PM (CET)
Building D, [Promotiezaal D.2.01](#) – [VUB Main Campus Brussels](#)
Pleinlaan 2 – 1050 Brussel
Or if you wish to attend online, [click here to join the meeting](#)

**OUT OF HARM'S WAY? AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-HARM
AMONG FLEMISH OLDER ADULTS**

JURY

INTERN:

Prof. Dr. Liesbeth De Donder (Chair)
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Prof. Dr. Bas van Alphen
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Prof. Dr. Sarah Dury
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

EXTERN:

Prof. Dr. Laurence Claes
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

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Coming by car? Please [register your licence plate](#) in advance to have access to the campus.

You are also invited to the reception afterwards.

Please confirm your attendance before February 28 by [filling out this form](#).

SUMMARY

The prevalence of suicide among older adults is notably high across many countries. With the global population aging rapidly, a pressing need for research arises to uncover the factors preceding suicide in this age group. Self-harm serves as strong predictor of suicide. However, studies focusing on types of self-harm, such as direct and indirect self-harm, are scarce. This doctoral dissertation aims to address this gap.

Although our systematic review on risk and protective factors of types of self-harm in adults aged 60 and over retrieved 45 studies, zero studies discussed non-suicidal self-injury or indirect self-harm. While most findings align with self-harm research in younger populations, the experience of loss seemed to be particularly relevant for older adults. Findings from our interviews with nine Flemish psychogeriatric experts suggested that self-harm in older adults may include distinct elements, such as the omission of certain behaviors, and is primarily engaged in to cope with emotions. Experts discussed cognitive and physical decline, advancing age, experiences of loss, and social isolation as particularly relevant risk factors for older adults. Based on these findings, a self-report questionnaire for older adults was developed and administered among 790 older adults. The overall lifetime prevalence of self-harm was 23.2%, with 8.2% at the age of 60 and older. Two risk profiles of self-harm in older age were established. The first risk profile showed that community-dwelling older adults who are diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder and who experience higher levels of emotional loneliness, are potentially more at risk to engage in self-harm. The second risk profile illustrated that a combination of certain maladaptive personality traits can potentially indicate a higher risk for self-harm in older people who are living at home, in a residential care facility or residential psychiatry. Finally, our findings suggested variations between direct and indirect self-harm regarding risk factors.

In sum, this dissertation underscores the relatively high prevalence of and differences between direct and indirect self-harm in adults aged 60 and over. Given the scarcity of studies distinguishing between these types of self-harm, future research should prioritize this differentiation, as this may be essential for comprehensive assessment and effective treatment of self-harm in older adults.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Lisa Van Hove earned her Master's degree in Clinical Psychology from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in 2019. After graduation, she remained at her alma mater, working as a mandate assistant in the Psychology Department. Throughout her mandate, Lisa taught 3rd and 4th year Psychology students and gained experience conducting international research on self-harm across different age groups. Motivated by the limited knowledge of self-harm in older adults, she started her PhD in psychology in February 2020. Since 2022, she has worked as a research assistant for the International Consortium on Self-Injury in Educational Settings (iceses.org), further developing her research skills. Alongside these activities, Lisa worked as a clinical psychologist with adolescents and young adults in a group practice until recently. In 2024, she was awarded the Student Award from the International Society for the Study of Self-Injury for her presentation on her PhD survey findings.